The Last Earth

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A Palestinian Story

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Contents

Khaled Abdul Ghani al-Lubani, otherwise known as "Marco," was born into a refugee family in Yarmouk, Syria and sought escape through an arduous path across continents. As a child, he was taught to believe he would never leave Yarmouk, unless the final destination was his adjoining village in northern Palestine. Only then would his family's honor be redeemed, and true freedom attained.

In our earliest exchange, Marco's first words to me were a verse from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish. Marco spoke of Palestine as if she were a woman; a beloved mother that was lost somewhere on the dusty trail of an unending journey.

1
Shit River

Let me re-arrange the evening with what suits my failure and her absence.

Mahmoud Darwish

Yarmouk was ever-present in Khaled's soul, pulling him in and out of an abyss of persistent fears, urging him to never return. What was he without Yarmouk, his first haven, his last earth? How could any place in God's unwelcoming universe be a home for him as a Palestinian first and foremost, and nothing else? When questioned, he answered without hesitation: "I am from the village of so and so in Palestine." Yet for him Yarmouk was all that remained of Palestine because the Palestine he knew existed only in books, or as the tattered map in his family's living room, and in old fables conveyed by long-dead grandparents.

At least he had her by his side to share his grief, for without her he would not have embarked on his quest. Her name was Maysam Saeed and she was Syrian. Her allure came from her seductive Mediterranean beauty and from the playful confidence she exuded. The impression that she gave was not one of arrogance, but rather was part of an innate game she would play with anyone she encountered.

They met as eager volunteers in Yarmouk's Palestine hospital. Innocent banter soon turned to flirtation that skimmed the boundaries of what was acceptable in the refugee camp. Their growing attraction drew them closer to a love

that would become impossible to contain. Nor could they have foreseen that they would soon embark on an odyssey in search of their last earth, crossing a sea whose tumultuous waters had drowned many lovers and many innocents who barely had a start in life. Their love kept them afloat amongst the misery of war, but they knew there would be no true convergence of their two lives on the other side of the boundlessly dark sea. Even if their tiny boat could succeed in eventually evading the Turkish and Greek coast guard, love alone would still not be enough.

They first made love on February 4, 2013. When he closes his eyes and thinks back to that sublime moment, Khaled gets goosebumps. Despite all the tragedies that befell him in war-ravaged Yarmouk, nothing would have stopped him from sneaking into Maysam's family home during "the hunger siege". Though starvation had left his face pale and gaunt, and his skin dry and creased, Khaled always managed to muster up the energy for a night of passion. His hunger for love eclipsed all else including the fact that she was a married woman. For Maysam, her suffering at the hands of a cruel husband was sufficient justification for the taboo affair. Her three children, who all had her same handsome face, glowing skin, dark silky hair and adoring eyes, were not an obstacle either. No one and nothing else mattered more than their love.

Maysam's parents were from Deraa in the south. They owned enough land to classify them as "landowners", but not enough to buy them special status in Syria's burgeoning aristocracy. Such status required more than wealth; it meant that one had to know how to use that wealth to win favor with the ruling class. They sold some of their land to build a relatively large house in the affluent Zahira neighborhood in Damascus, and the rest was saved for a "dark day". That day did come, when what began as a restrained uprising in Deraa morphed

into the era's most devastating war, forcing millions to flee their homes to escape the relentless bloodshed.

Khaled and Maysam's first attempt at crossing the sea was doomed to fail. The one thousand American dollars that Khaled's father had given him was almost depleted, and the money promised to him by his wealthy aunt in the United Arab Emirates hadn't yet arrived. By then they had settled in Izmir, Turkey's closest city to Greece. Seeking a chance at a normal life, they knew this was only a temporary stopover. After a short stay in a cheap hotel, they found cheaper accommodation in a small flat that cost them 400 Turkish lira each month. With money running out, and Maysam's anxieties increasingly suffocating her every thought, she wondered if she'd made a rash and grave mistake in leaving her children behind. As Khaled waited and waited for his aunt's money, he felt the pressure mounting and knew he had to take action.

Not far away from their flat in the Ucyol neighborhood, a makeshift Syrian Club was founded to serve refugees, but only those who declared their hostility to the Syrian government and swore allegiance to its enemies in the Free Syrian Army. Khaled and Maysam had learned about survival in times of war, and took on whatever identity they had to in order to keep a low profile. Whether facing an armed man or a feeble victim, in a split second they could gauge the situation and determine the role that needed to be played. At times Khaled claimed to be Syrian, denying any connection to Palestine. This they learned from the mistakes of Palestinian refugee friends, who were thrown in Turkish jails for significantly longer durations than their Syrian counterparts. Once, he walked the streets of a Kurdish village at the Syrian–Turkish border wearing army boots he had found somewhere by chance. Unaware that these old boots were the same kind worn by Kurdish PKK fighters, he was surprised when this footwear brought him the admiration of the locals who saw the Palestinian refugee as a

Kurdish warrior ready to fight for the Kurdish cause. Maysam, on the other hand, was saved by the grace of her beauty, and by the sorrow that was a constant in her hypnotic eyes.

It had been a month since they escaped the inferno in Syria, and after more weeks achingly dragged by, the prospects of freedom seemed dim. So they used their remaining money to join other refugees—Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans—united by the belief that a quick death at sea was better than the continued insecurity of life in the shadow of eternal wars.

* * *

Khaled does not know when or why the family name "al-Lubani" was dropped, shortening the name to "Abdul Ghani." It might have had something to do with his grandfather's profession. Khaled's grandfather, Mohammed Abdul Ghani al-Lubani, was a proud man whose graceful manner of speaking earned him immediate respect. He was a well-regarded government employee serving as an assistant engineer during the British Mandate in Palestine where he designed and paved many roads in the north of the country. He wanted no more than a humble and honorable existence. But in 1948, his village, Al-Mujaydil, was destroyed and cleansed of Palestinians to make room for an Israeli town that was given a variation of the original Arabic name. Mohammed sought refuge in Syria. He had never imagined that he might one day have to flee his homeland to escape soldiers brandishing metal blades capable of splitting a man open, nor did he imagine he would end up languishing in a perpetual purgatory for sins he did not commit. In his naive mind, returning to Al-Mujaydil was merely a matter of time, for the village had survived since before it was officially listed in Ottoman records in 1596. Patiently and hopefully he and his wife waited, and waited,

in Jobar, a small village outside the municipal borders of Damascus. This became their destiny—queueing at a never-ending charity line, waiting for their right of return, preparing for a meal that would never be served.

It was an irony of fate that the al-Lubani family settled in Jobar, an ancient village that was mentioned in the Talmud as one of several places near Damascus where Jews once lived. The area around its synagogue was now populated by Palestinian fellahin who had been violently forced out of their homes. It was the Jewish Zionist militia of the Yishuv Golani Brigade that violently expelled the al-Lubani family from their land, forcing them to seek shelter in this distant and unknown place where Jews had once sought safety.

With no jobs available for refugees, Mohammed al-Lubani had no other option but to shovel cow dung and sell it to local bakeries to fuel their ovens. It was a challenge to his sense of dignity, for the rotting smell made him feel like a walking piece of shit. But feeling like shit was better than death, he figured, at least for the time being. To motivate himself, he would imagine crossing a river of shit and emerging on the other side with a refreshing waterfall awaiting him, purifying him of all his suffering, and allowing him a clean slate, a new start, a new life. In time, Mohammed found a stable and a more dignified job. But the family name was ineradicably sullied by the stench of dung. To put his past behind him, he garnered his remaining pride and, without discussion, the family name 'al-Lubani' was dropped from all records, and they started anew.

Mohammed's beloved first born entered their lives in Jobar on December 16, 1959. In sync with the political mindset of most refugees, the name Jamal was bestowed upon him. Mohammed believed that the charismatic Egyptian leader Jamal Abdel Nasser was ready to liberate their land and facilitate the most important thing in the world—their return

to Palestine. Heartache befell Mohammed when Nasser died soon after a painful and humiliating defeat in 1967, and the rest of Palestine was conquered by the ever-expanding State of Israel. So Jamal Abdul Ghani, who was born in Jobar, remained in Jobar; that is until he met Hana.

She was a kindergarten teacher in the Summo School. They fell madly in love, but when Mohammed went to ask for her hand on behalf of his son, he discovered that even the degradation of exile did not fully dismantle the class boundaries that governed the relationships between Palestinian communities before they had all become refugees. He returned home to tell his son: "I am afraid that those people do not see us as their equals."

The naked truth was they were equal—now. Both families had moved to Yarmouk as desolate refugees soon after the camp was established in 1957 for thousands of dispossessed Palestinians. Before the Nakba happened, Hana's family, the al-Khadras, were city dwellers who amassed wealth and owned plentiful fertile land in Safad. They could afford shopping in the best retailers, dressing in handmade clothing from the best artisans, and eating the tastiest food available. The al-Lubani family owned little land and came from a small village where food was not chosen from a fancy menu, and clothes were not fashion but another means of survival. Even in their prime, they were still bordering on poverty. With time on their side, and Jamal and Hana tirelessly fighting for their love, the stubborn delusions of Hana's family evaporated and the al-Khadras accepted the reality that their former status counted for nothing in the refugee camp. When this finally hit home, Jamal and Hana married, and it was then that the al-Khadras realized the raw truth of their family tragedy.

After years of unemployment, Jamal found a job making bread at Mazza Automatic Bakery, while his father became a tax collector, a position that provided financial security and

a certain amount of prestige. Mohammed's self-image mired in cow dung was put to rest when he dumped his workman's uniform and tall rubber boots for shiny brown shoes, a golden tie, and a chocolate brown suit that matched his perfect felt hat. His tastes were so refined that he was easily mistaken as a well-to-do man from the high streets of Damascus. Just as his bad luck was beginning to change, Mohammed was ambushed by thugs looking to make a quick buck. Throwing him to the ground, they stole papers worth 40,000 Syrian lira from his prized leather bag. The coveted honor that he had redeemed slipped through his fingertips like dry desert sand. It was too much for Mohammed Abdel Ghani al-Lubani to bear; he died a few days later from a massive stroke.

Khaled was then a one-year-old toddler, born on May 4, 1988, followed by Sa'id a year later, and Majid the following year. The family lived in a two-story house in Sa'sa' Street. It was all that the old man had left behind for his wife, son and grandchildren, aside from the depressing legacy of dispossession and indignity.

Jamal was a resourceful man who inherited his father's ability to create something out of nothing. The older women of the camp loved Jamal, and would pinch his cheeks and praise God for creating such talent. He eased their stress by intuitively fixing fridges that had not kept food fresh in years, and made laundry machines stop their clunking. He ran a small carpentry shop naming it after his eldest son: 'Warshat Khaled'—Khaled's Shop. Furthermore, driven by a love for literature and the spoken word, he taught himself all he needed to know and more, without earning an official piece of paper from formal education. Soon his noble reputation was its own credential, and he eventually became a respected teacher at an UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) school in the camp. Khaled, in a natural passing of the torch, inherited his

father's fascination with science and technology and he too could fix any broken thing. In the time they spent together and in the passions they shared, Khaled grew closer to his father, and further away from the mother who he could never satisfy or feel loved by. To him, Hana was in a relentless state of irritability, as if she were fighting demons of unwavering pain and infinite disappointments.

Despite some good times in Yarmouk, the family was haunted by fears of the camp itself; a fear looming in the background like dark music in a horror film. Rarely did Khaled venture beyond his neighborhood. When he did leave his neck of the woods, he only did so in the company of his father, or to walk to Kawkab Elementary School and back; and it was always in one straight line, never deviating or pausing. His mother and father did not allow him to talk to anyone outside their sanctioned circle of friends and relatives, nor could he play marbles in the street, or use "bad language" even if others told him to "fuck off" a thousand times. Trust was not something easily earned by anyone, neither by the government, nor by the factions that spoke on behalf of the refugees and supposedly protected them. Only once did the teenaged Khaled disobey family orders when he joined a political discussion organized by Fatah loyalists in Yarmouk. The topic was "liberating oneself as a prerequisite to liberating Palestine," but he was not dazzled by what seemed to be pretentious words with no connection to the daily treadmill and despair of his family, so he never returned to their meetings.

Angst afflicted all of Yarmouk and permeated every facet of refugee life. The isolation felt at home was mirrored in the fear of every representation of authority. Even Khaled's second grade teacher, Wafa Zaghmout, behaved like a dictator running a terrifying fiefdom of her own, punishing pupils for no reason and beating children at will. Khaled, who was punished severely for "sweating too much," hated Wafa. When

many years later she was diagnosed with cancer, a feeling of relief overcame him because he knew her oppressive reign would finally be over, and other innocent children would be spared her cruelty. She had finally received retribution for her malice, he felt. Fortunately, Khaled had one angel of goodness who gave him sanctuary, and that was Iman Ahmad, the fully covered Syrian teacher, and mother of his best friend, Ayham. To him, she was the saint who restored his faith in school and in women. She treated all the children the way she treated her own son. She was a fine woman and mother who embodied all that Khaled had wished for in his own broken experience as a son.

It was at the Kawkab School that Khaled was introduced to the adventures of Marco Polo. In class, when they read about his adventures, nothing would distract him. China skies were laid with bright red silken carpets, Japanese cherry blossoms bloomed in endless green fields, and the aroma of Indian spices whisked by his senses in dreams of life as Marco. Enthralled and excited by the prospect of life beyond his neighborhood, he urged his friends to call him "Marco." This nickname became his own and made him feel special. It allowed him to escape his very small world and stray from that one straight line he walked every single day, back and forth. His father Jamal was not impressed. He had chosen to name his eldest son Khaled because it was the name of the eldest son of Jamal Abdul Nasser. So, in this way, both father and son carried the same heroic names. Still proud of Nasser's legacy and his bloodline, despite its imperfection, it was as if the family never learned from past defeats.

Being a good son and wanting to please his father, "Marco" tried to live up to Jamal's high expectations and obtained a degree in English literature from a Damascus university. His ambition was to teach like his father, at an UNRWA school. He studied hard, obtained high grades and, like his father,

was esteemed by his professors and peers. After a long day of study, he would fix broken appliances and repair batteries until the late hours of the night. Working long and hard, he showed his father that he was committed to the same legacy of problem-solving. Putting a smile on Jamal's face required more than the average son's efforts, and the rare times he saw that smile made it worth all the trouble. But a true connection between Jamal and Khaled never truly developed until 2013, when they were both besieged in Yarmouk, trapped together in a fight to stay alive, as hundreds perished under a rain of bombs amid the threat of an undignified death by hunger.

* * *

Marco had a powerful imagination. His mind travelled on endless journeys whenever life felt intolerable. Daydreaming helped him cope with his mother's humiliating punishments as a child; his father's rage; and Wafa Zaghmout's class of petrified little children. It came in handy whenever he was stuck in arduously long lines at UN feeding centers for Palestinian refugee children where unruly kids pushed, shoved, and tossed around all sorts of profanity. An adventure crafted by his rich mind would transport him to the front of the line, where he'd receive a slice of dried bread, half of an apple that had already gone brown, and part of an egg. On special occasions, a thin slice of canned beef was added to the mix, news of which would travel quickly through the line of giddy schoolchildren.

When the day came that Marco would walk in his father's footsteps as a teacher, to his great disappointment, teaching was an interminable exercise in boredom and he hated it. Something he had worked so long for, and which his father had spoken so endlessly about, made his stomach twist into knots each time he walked into a classroom. He had imagined